

The New York Times

Charities Pledge \$19 Million to Jesuit Model Schools

By Diana Jean Schemo

May 21, 2003

Impressed by the success shown by a network of four Jesuit high schools in working with urban teenagers, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and another major charity pledged \$19 million today to bolster the schools and export the model to 12 additional cities.

The Cristo Rey schools, as they are known, began in 1994, and now include schools in Portland, Ore.; Austin, Tex.; Los Angeles; and Chicago. The new money is intended to expand the program to New York City, Cleveland, Denver, Tucson, the Boston area and elsewhere.

In a telephone news conference announcing the donations, Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Gates Foundation, praised Cristo Rey schools for reversing the trend toward shuttering Catholic schools in the inner city.

In a Chicago neighborhood where 62 percent of the students do not make it to graduation, some 85 percent of the Cristo Rey students graduate, and all of this year's graduates are going on to college, said the Rev. John Foley, who founded the schools.

Mr. Vander Ark said the unusual business model of the Cristo Rey schools also intrigued the Gates Foundation. To meet expenses, the schools double as temporary employment services. Students work without pay five days a month in entry-level jobs at local businesses, which pay the schools roughly \$25,000 a school year for their services. The money offsets operating costs, and the jobs provide the students with work experience.

"They're small and personalized, academically rigorous college prep programs," said Mr. Vander Ark, who praised the schools for exposing teenagers to the business world and instilling in them a "culture of respect and responsibility."

"The graduation and achievement rates are remarkably good compared to neighborhood high schools serving the same population, and we think all families, particularly urban and disadvantaged families, ought to have a variety of quality options available to them in education," he said.

The schools combine work experience and education, scheduling classes in a longer school day and lengthier academic year to accommodate the students' jobs. At the Cristo Rey school in Chicago, families pay \$2,200 tuition, the lowest in the archdiocese,

but 74 percent of the operating cost for the college preparatory program is paid for by the outside jobs. Fifty-two percent of the students receive scholarships as well, said Joshua Hale, director of development at the Chicago Cristo Rey school.

Mr. Hale said the school encouraged students with the money and grades to attend other private schools if possible, and tried to enroll students who had no other options. "What we're looking for is kids that are motivated," he said. "They may be a C student, but they want a brighter future.

"Those students excel," he said.

Father Foley said the work experience expanded the horizons of students from poor neighborhoods where expectations of success are hard to come by.

"Suddenly they're surrounded by people who are asking them not if they're going to college, but where they're going to college," he said.

The Gates Foundation, which has spent almost \$500 million on educational projects, by Mr. Vander Ark's count, is putting nearly \$10 million into the Cristo Rey schools. The rest of the money is coming from the Cassin Educational Initiative, a private group and longtime supporter of the Cristo Rey model.

B. J. Cassin, chairman of the group, said the income from 400 students sharing 100 jobs paid \$2.5 million, equivalent to the return on a \$50 million endowment.

"Catholic schools have long been committed to helping disadvantaged young people," Mr. Cassin said.

The opening of new Catholic schools in the inner cities runs counter to a larger trend in which urban Catholic schools are closing or moving to wealthier suburbs. Last year, some 140 Catholic schools merged or shut down, while 47 new schools opened, according to a coming report from the National Catholic Educational Association cited in Education Week, a trade paper. According to the report, the number of Catholic schools closing is the highest in five years.

Tom Loveless, an education analyst at the Brookings Institution, said most educators would watch for results as the Cristo Rey schools expanded to new cities. "Frankly, in the field of education, we're seeing so many promising things not pan out," Mr. Loveless said.

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a group that supports vouchers and charter schools, praised the move for drawing attention to unsung schools, saying it "disarms those arguments that say private schools are only about serving the cream of the crop."

"There are dozens or at least a handful of models like Cristo Rey, that are viable, successful schools that have targeted needy kids for years, very much out of the public eye," Ms. Allen said.